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Online help for love-seeking college Cupids

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(AP) -- They might not want to admit it. But even when surrounded by hundreds of potential dates -- in their classes, at parties or just walking around campus -- many college students have a hard time finding love.

That fact, coupled with their Internet savvy, is making students a natural market for a growing number of high-tech cupids who are providing online matchmaking services aimed at the college crowd.

Some, such as the newly launched CollegeLuv.com, were started by companies that already run more general online dating services. Others have been created by students such as Michael Mason, who saw a need and decided to fill it. Most, though not all, charge a fee.

"It used to be that no one wanted to tell their friends they met someone online," says Mason, a North Carolina State sophomore who started CampusFlirts.com three months ago.

"That stigma still exists, but I think it's really starting to fade."

So far, about 3,000 students from campuses across the country have signed up for Mason's matchmaking service, which he started with money from his credit cards.

Jonathan Monsarrat, a graduate of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, went smaller scale, creating a free temporary site that helped students and recent graduates from MIT, Harvard and Wellesley find dates for Valentine's Day. Nearly 4,000 people signed up.

Because of it, Monsarrat said, even he found what he calls an "almost girlfriend."

Love online

Online matchmaking for college students is part of an overall trend in which new sites are being created to help people with similar backgrounds or interests find one



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another. They include everything from Makeoutclub.com, a site for fans of indie and hardcore music, to MeraPyar.com, a matchmaking site for people of South Asian descent.

But many entrepreneurs see love-starved college students as, potentially, one of the most lucrative markets -- in large part because they access the World Wide Web as easily as they use the telephone.

"This is the way they're brought up; it's not something they think about," says Aaron Ben-Ze'ev, an Israeli philosophy professor who's about to release the book, "Love Online: Emotions on the Internet."

Not that every college student wants it known that she or he is cruising for love online. Mason says some subscribers sheepishly ask to have their profiles removed once teasing friends see them.

But many others happily share their stories.

Tonia Turner, a 19-year-old student at Indiana Institute of Technology, has gone out on several dates with men she's met online. So far, she hasn't found that special someone.

"But I haven't met anyone psycho," says Turner, who spends a good bit of time at CollegeLuv.com flirting by computer with people whose photos and profiles she likes.

Time saver

Faraz Ali, a Harvard business school graduate who still lives in the Boston area, recently hosted a party and invited three women he'd met via Monsarrat's site.

He says he was glad the site included graduate students and alumni.

"Something told me that trying to chase down that undergrad was simply not exactly going to be a high percentage shot," says Ali, a product manager for a biotech company who recently turned 30.

He says many people his age and younger have trouble finding dates because they are too shy or stuck in their ways -- or study, work or travel too much.

He also thinks many people, including some of his friends, are too picky. And that, he quips, makes it "difficult to settle for something less than the average 'Swedish-model-brain-surgeon-tango-dancing-intellectual-hippy-chic-yet-maternally-inclined-best-friend.'"

Meeting people via the Web, he says, helps get them out of their rut -- and makes them less dependent on friends who want to set them up, but might not know their tastes.





"The blind dates I've gone on were some of the worst," agrees Darryl Cascanette, who -- after having no luck while in college -- decided to try the "college connection" service at Matchmaker.com not long after he'd graduated from the University of Ottawa in Canada.

About two years ago, he met Tanya, then a student at a college nine hours away. They plan to marry this summer.

"It's not for everybody," Cascanette says of online dating. "But if you do luck out -- even to meet friends -- it's great."

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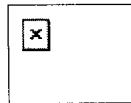
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